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SHAMAN'S HEART: THE POWER OF LISTENING

by Karl Boyken



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One April day, I'm sitting at my desk, minding my own business, when I feel the urge to take a look at The Monroe Institute® Web site. I pull up the list of programs. One in particular catches my eye: *Shaman's Heart*. I don't know anything about this Byron Metcalf fellow, the person who developed the program and will train it, but something about the description tugs at me. I check my calendar for June, and before I know it, I've signed up.

A month later, in mid-May, I have the first sign that *Shaman's Heart* will be different from the other programs I've attended. A message from Byron arrives in my inbox, encouraging me to formulate a specific intention for the program before I arrive. I puzzle over this. I'm not even sure exactly why I signed up for *Shaman's Heart*, and now I'm supposed to set an intention? I sit with this for a while, and gradually something takes shape in my mind, a tentative sketch of an intention—I hope it will do.

My travel day arrives. On the plane, as I get closer to Virginia, I can feel something afoot. I can feel the energy moving already. On the ride to the Institute, I get to know another *Shaman's Heart* participant. Another sign that this program will be unusual: she has never been to a program. It turns out that there are four participants who've never done a *GATEWAY VOYAGE*®. But Byron and Karen Malik bring them up to speed quickly, and by Sunday lunch they're old pros.

Byron leads us through what seems to me to be an interesting and very effective fusion of mindfulness and meditation techniques with shamanic journeying: Hemi-Sync® with drum and rattle. As the week unfolds, he takes us out of our heads and into our belly and heart centers. I begin to feel very open. In our individual CHEC units and group meditation exercises, we call on our helpers, and many physical animal helpers begin showing up. I see a salamander on the deck outside the door to the dining hall. Several

people encounter a black snake outside by the dinner bell; we name him Henry. I shepherd wasps out of my room from time to time.

Byron guides us toward the breathwork sessions on Wednesday, sharing his years of experience and his academic knowledge with us. Wednesday morning we gather in David Francis Hall for the breathwork. Some of us have quiet, angelic experiences, while several others have more active and intense sessions. Mine falls more toward the intense end of the scale, dealing with birth issues—a common theme of breathwork. Afterward, I feel incredibly light and empty, open and energetic, *new*. Later, as I talk with Byron about my session, he leads me out of the story in my head and back into the breath, into the present moment, into the emotional-physical-energetic experience that the story evokes. I realize that this present-moment experience is much more important than what happened in the past. It's something I can bring home with me.

That evening, I stand on Rainbow Ridge Road, looking over the pasture below, watching a fawn search for his mother. He runs back and forth, and every few seconds he makes a kind of bleating sound. I'd seen the doe earlier; now she must be watching from the tree line. Finally, the fawn realizes he is being watched by a potential predator—me. He drops to the ground in some tall grass and is quiet. As I walk back toward Nancy Penn, I smile at this example of abandonment issues.

After the program ends, the feeling of openness remains. One day I'm sitting at a table with a man I just met, a veteran. He tells me of his experience in the war. As he talks, he seems to be having a difficult time with the emotional energy trying to move through him. I just remain open and present, just sit and listen. When he finishes, he says he usually can't get through the whole story, that he feels something about me has helped him. I tell him that all I did was listen.

Weeks later, I'm in my ninety-two-year-old mother's room at the care center where she was admitted a couple of days earlier. My father, ninety-four himself but still living at home, shakes his head as he watches her rummage through the empty drawers of her nightstand. What she's looking for, we'll never know—the dementia has stolen her ability to speak sensibly. As I help her open the same drawer she's just checked, I check in with my breath, with my belly and heart center, and just try to be open and present with her and my father. All I can do is listen.

[Karl's mother passed away peacefully in her sleep on August 23 .]

